'If the Inside was the Outside': Gender, Heteronormativity and the Body in David Levithan's *Every Day*

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> I wake up. Immediately I have to figure out who I am. It's not just the body – opening my eyes and discovering whether the skin on my arm is light or dark, whether my hair is long or short, whether I'm fat or thin, boy or girl, scarred or smooth […] Every day I am someone else. I am myself – I know who I am myself – but I am also someone else. It has always been like this. (Levithan 2012: 1)

The opening lines of David Levithan's *Every Day* (2012) immediately pull the reader into the fascinating and disorienting existence of A, the sixteen-year-old protagonist who wakes up every morning to spend that day in one body, only to awaken the next morning inhabiting a different body. During the course of the novel and across the variety of young lives that A inhabits, A encounters Rihannon, a teenage girl. They forge a connection and fall in love. Drawing upon the transformative potential of the fantastic, Levithan uses A's extraordinary ability to explore the intersections between subjectivity and the gendered body and to interrogate traditional norms of masculinity, femininity and gender ontology. A and Rihannon's tentatively evolving relationship proposes intriguing possibilities for the reimagining and expansion of concepts of sexuality, difference and selfhood in literature for young people.

A has spent years occupying diverse people and asserts an ostensibly inclusive and fluid gender perspective: 'when it came to gender, I was both and neither' (Levithan 2012: 254). This apparently open-ended approach to gender expression and to wider issues of ontology and representation is supported by Levithan's device of manipulating sentence structure to avoid using relative pronouns during A's narration whenever A creates clauses to express or describe A. However, the apparent cognitive dissonance posed by the novel's opening paragraph – with its rupture of conventional links between personhood and the body inhabited by that person and the possibility of multiple personhood in one body – is undermined by the conventional rhetoric of binary systems for governing the permissible level of difference which is allowed to different bodies. The apparently supple and non-discriminatory tone of this opening paragraph is predicated on a reductionist approach to embodiment and how different bodies are positioned within regimes of pleasure, power and prejudice. Despite A's protestations of treating every individual body that A encounters in the same equal and non-judgmental manner, A utilizes and relies on hegemonic 'either/or' concepts for regulating gender codes such as difference, desirability, beauty, normality and abnormality: people are either light- or dark-skinned, fat or thin, scarred or smooth, a boy or a girl.

The organizing principle of heteronormativity and the normalization of heterosexuality have long been intertwined in modern Western society: 'Heteronormativity captures the processes through which social institutions and social policies act to reinforce the belief that human beings fall into the male/man and female/woman categories, which exist in order to fulfill complementary roles' (Crisp 2009: 335). In contrast, Judith Butler has argued that gender is a cultural construct which can be enacted differently in different contexts and that it is the reiteration of the performance of a gender script that creates the illusion of naturalness and fixedness. Hence gender is 'a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time, to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being' (Butler 1990: 43–4). Throughout the novel, A insists that A has never thought 'of myself as a boy or a girl – I never have. I would just think of myself as a boy or a girl for a day. It was like a different set of clothes' (Levithan 2012: 155). Although this statement intriguingly suggests that A is aware of the performative nature of masculinity and femininity, A's engagement with gender is still interpolated within the biases and pressures of heteronormative ideologies.

Many critics have explored the tensions between the emancipatory power of literature for young people, its potential for diversity, and the traditional ideological alignment of these narratives within didactic and heteronormative paradigms. As Seelinger Trites notes, the Young Adult (YA) novel 'allows for postmodern questions about authority, power, repression, and the nature of growth in ways that traditional *Bildungsromane* do not' (Trites 2000: 19), and this offers valuable opportunities to investigate the ethics of representation, and to promote a diverse range of identities and experiences for young readers to encounter and imaginatively engage with. In particular, traditional concepts of childhood innocence, the associated suppression of young people's sexualities and any desires perceived as deviant, and the adult need to preserve this assumed triumvirate of young people's psychic, bodily and cultural purity have been interrogated and problematized. As Tison Pugh has observed, the 'conflicted gesture – of purging sexuality from a text to preserve children's innocence while nonetheless depicting some form of heterosexuality as childhood's desire end – reveals the queer foundations of children's literature' (Pugh 2011: 2). After surveying the presence and representation of different gender expressions during the last three decades of YA fiction, Corrine Wickens optimistically proposed that a 'shift toward more progressive inclusion of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning (LGBTQ) characters began in the late 1990s, highlighting some of the sociocultural shifts toward acceptance of LGBTQ individuals' has gradually been occurring' (Wickens 2011: 149). However, I agree with Lee Edelman's conclusion that an ideology of 'reproductive futurism' still underpins the vast majority of literature for teenagers, including 'gay adolescent novels', and that this doctrine strives to preserve 'the absolute privilege of heteronormativity by rendering unthinkable, by casting outside the

political domain, the possibility of a queer resistance to this organizing principle of communal relations' (Edelman 2004: 2).

Through his emphasis on the importance of diversity and his promotion of an inclusive range of gender expressions, Levithan seeks to challenge the nexus of social pressures, expectations and judgments about teenage desire, sexuality and embodiment. Levithan's fiction is notable for its sophisticated investigation of and sensitivity towards LGBT and diversity issues for teenage readers. An insistence on not representing LGBT characters and themes as a platform for a didactic 'issue novel' is central to Levithan's narrative politics. A claims early on that 'I will never define myself in terms of anyone else. I will never feel the pressure of peers or the burden of parental expectation. I can view everyone as pieces of a whole, and focus on the whole, not the pieces' (Levithan 2012: 7). However as A's romance with Rihannon progresses, A is forced to revise A's initially naive presumption of an autonomy which transcends the regulations and codes that shape other people's corporeal lives. A gradually develops a more humble and reflective understanding of the individuality and complexity of each of the people that A occupies, finally recognizing that 'By seeing the world from so many angles, I get more of a sense of its dimensionality' (107).

In his acclaimed novel, *Boy Meets Boy* (2003), Levithan created a community which joyfully unites all genders and sexualities without prejudice, hierarchies or division: 'There really isn't a gay scene or a straight scene in our town. They got all mixed up a while back, which I think is for the best' (Levithan 2003: 1). Many critics have praised Levithan's skilful narrative strategies and their capacity to support a more expansive, inclusive and inquisitive reading experience. Wickens argues that 'through the novel's blurred genres and inventive use of linguistic features, *Boy Meets Boy* is able to more effectively undermine heteronormative assumptions by presenting the unthinkable: children as sexual beings, hegemonic masculinity as in fact nonhegemonic and detrimental to success, and homosexuality as normalized and even ordinary' (Wickens 2011: 148). Moreover, Amy Pattee claims that 'Levithan sets *Boy Meets Boy* in a utopian town in which gay and transgendered students are accepted and celebrated and strict boundaries of traditional gender expression have dissolved; through this use of setting, the author effectively subverts the paradigm of compulsory heterosexuality in young adult fiction in general and young adult romance, specifically' (Pattee 2009: 156). One scene in the novel especially demonstrates the limiting and disempowering consequences of traditional terminology and concepts around sexual orientations. The narrator and his best friend, Kyle, are discussing Kyle's unhappiness with and potential resistance to being confined and judged according to conventional heteronormative regimes:

> 'I'm so confused. [...] I still like girls. [...] And I also like guys.[...] But I wanted to be one or the other. [...] But every time I'm with one, I think the other's possible.'

> ‘So you’re bisexual.’
>
> Kyle’s face flushes. ‘I hate that word. [...] It makes me sound like I’m divided.’
>
> ‘When really you’re doubled?’
>
> ‘Right-O.’
>
> […]
>
> ‘We could call you an ambisexual. A duosexual. A—’
>
> ‘Do I really have to find a word for it?’ Kyle interrupts. ‘Can’t it just be what it is?’
>
> ‘Of course,’ I say, even though in the bigger world I’m not so sure. The world loves stupid labels. I wish we got to choose our own.’ (Levithan 2003: 85–6)

Although Levithan seems to present a compelling case for a welcome questioning and reconfiguration of gender expressions, the novel still frames these conversations within regimes of naturalized norms and associated perceptions of anything difference as abnormal. Even gay and queer characters are represented as inevitably compelled to use and rely on labels, even if these epithets are of their own choosing, in order to perform the tacitly necessary work of classifying and regulating people. Despite the novel’s apparently utopian tone and its optimistic ending demonstrating characters’ capacity for confronting and overcoming homophobic prejudice, I ultimately agree with Thomas Crisp’s argument that ‘while Levithan does indeed “flip” the binary in *Boy Meets Boy*, in many ways, he simply shows the other side. He repositions the world to bring the inside-out and the outside-in, but “out” and “in” values persist and ultimately leave the binary intact […] This is not enough: to truly disrupt heteronormativity, literature would have to be imagined beyond identity categories’ (Crisp 2009: 343).

Every Day constitutes Levithan’s most ambitious endeavour to date – and arguably one of literature for teenagers – to attempt to ‘imagine beyond identity categories’. Through A’s tantalizing capacity for gender mobility and transformation, *Every Day* interrogates even further the potential for dissolving regulatory concepts that police hegemonic gender systems such as gay or straight. A significant number of the bodies that A inhabits are homosexual, lesbian and transgender and there are many cissexual and transgender characters who act as friends and relatives in the everyday lives of A’s hosts. A is particularly impressed by the pleasures and challenges of resisting conservative gender binaries while inhabiting the body of Vic who is ‘biologically female, gendered male’ (Levithan 2012: 253). Although Rihannon’s traditional hegemonic attitudes are mystified by this anomaly, stating that ‘I don’t even know what that means’ (257), A shares an affinity with Vic who lives ‘within the definition of his own truth, just like me. He knows who he wants to be. Most people our age don’t have to do that. They stay within the realm of the easy’

(253). Considering the ideological omission and often explicit erasure of gay, queer and transgender characters even in contemporary fiction for teenagers, *Every Day* represents and advocates for an admirable range of sexualities and gender expressions.

Levithan's emphasis on the ongoing process of the construction and performance of gendered identity problematizes many of the ideological and easy assumptions of the heteronormative romance plot which dominates much YA fiction. Rihannon's variously non-sexual and sexual encounters with A's different physical incarnations – male, female, heterosexual, gay, lesbian, queer and transgender — pose a provocative dilemma for the romance genre's expectation and almost mandate of reciprocal monogamy by its protagonists. After all, what constitutes fidelity and what counts as cheating when she is engaging in various intimate acts with a partner who is continuously present albeit operating in different bodies in these different moments? Rihannon and A must negotiate and confront uncomfortable blurrings and transgressions of the boundaries which police normative constructions of natural and unnatural embodiment.

When A finally confides in Rihannon and tells her the secret of A's migration from body to body, A predicts that she would react 'in two ways: revelation or revulsion' (95). Significantly, the three greatest tests for A and Rihannon's reciprocal ability to respond to and desire each other all involve extreme corporeal reality: firstly, when A occupies Ashley, a 'superhot black girl' (150) who looks like Beyoncé; secondly, when A wakes up inside Rihannon's body; and thirdly, when A inhabits the body of an obese teenager. In the first instance, A feels alienated and rendered untouchable by the force of Ashley's gorgeousness. Meanwhile Rihannon is paralysed by Ashley's superior embodiment of female beauty as well as by her own heterosexual anxieties. Initially stating that 'I think my imagination needs a little more time to catch up to the situation' (150), she struggles with being positioned within a lesbian relationship and is noticeably 'less affectionate' (225) with A when s/he occupies this formidable female body. Interestingly, in contrast to multiple times when A has been involved in a male gay relationship, this is one of only two times that A attempts to pursue and sustain an explicitly romantic and (at least from A's expectations) a sexually active relationship while female with Rihannon or with any other girl.

Caroline Jones, noting the relative elision of lesbian narratives and the representation of queer female desire within young-adult literature, argues that far too many '"traditional" and "mediating" texts introduce and attempt to "normalize" lesbian identity, but essentially fail to acknowledge, explore, or advocate for lesbian identity or desire.' Instead, they merely 'address the nonlesbian reader's curiosity about the lesbian Other' (Jones 2013: 79) rather than authentically engaging with these identities. This pattern holds true in *Every Day* as Levithan deflects any chance of A and Rihannon engaging in lesbian sexual activity as well as evading a deeper exploration of the potential

subversiveness and complexities of lesbian desire. Instead, he displaces the rationale for any discomfort or ambivalence felt by the characters or the reader onto the widely-agreed 'untouchable' power (Levithan 2012: 151) of this body's beauty which would typically overwhelm anyone, whether heterosexual, gay, queer or asexual. Rihannon is thus presented as performing an ostensibly normal failure of imagination in this difficult situation since A's appearance is 'too much. You're too perfect right now. I can't imagine being with someone like […] you[…]. I can't see beyond her, okay?' (153).

The second situation juxtaposes comedy and horror as A attempts to navigate a day within Rihannon's body without immeasurably damaging the delicate equilibrium of trust in their emergent romance. This fantastical shared physical communion is foreshadowed earlier in the novel when A and Rihannon trade stories that no one else knows about them. They each choose to share a story embedded in a moment of physical development, curiosity and a desire to move past the proscribed innocence of childhood into a supposedly more adult and illicit experience of bodily self-awareness and sexual self-expression. Rihannon describes how she secretly and unsuccessfully tried to pierce her own ears when she was ten and A recounts reading Judy Blume's novel, *Forever* (1975), at eight years old and thinking that 'it was unfair that the boy would name his, um, organ, and the girl wouldn't name hers. So I decided to give mine a name' (Levithan 2012: 60). While inhabiting Rihannon's body, A explicitly refuses the temptation of a similar kind of naming or knowledge of Rihannon's private parts and is desperate not to 'take any advantage' or 'peek' (188) at any part of Rihannon's naked form. Despite these efforts, A is overwhelmed by the relentless overload of sensation from uniquely knowing and feeling the world from the inside of Rihannon's body: 'To experience her body's balance within the world, the sensation of her skin from the inside, touching her face and receiving the touch from both sides – it's unavoidable and incredibly intense' (190). To A's great relief, Rihannon miraculously does not feel threatened or violated by this uncanny incident and instead she discovers that she has come to know and understand A more through this experience while A was so intimately inside her body: 'I didn't feel like I'd missed a day. It was like I woke up and something had been […] added' (202).

Levithan portrays this alienating and potentially abhorrent situation with narrative elegance and tact as the narrative voice slips between first-person singular and first-person plural with the merging of A's and Rihannon's perspectives, and intriguingly extends this delicacy of tone whenever there is any act of sexual intimacy between A and Rihannon. Although readers might reasonably expect at least some physical details regarding characters' bodies to be supplied in a novel for teenagers which chronicles multiple romantic and erotic encounters by an entity that occupies a new body every day, Levithan never provides any information about his characters' sexual interactions or examples of their sexual curiosity, whether LGBTQ or heterosexual. When A climbs a mountain while occupying Rihannon's body, symbolic intercourse is

suggested to have taken place through their intertwined physical feelings of sweating, exertion and pleasure. Likewise, A and Rihannon's love-making later in the novel is presented indirectly and quite lyrically: 'This is what we look like when we are completely open to each other. This is where we go when we no longer want to hide' (228).

This seemingly tasteful decision not to acknowledge or represent adolescent sexual expression takes on a more ominous aspect in light of Western societal discomfort and normalizing processes of surveillance and repression regarding young people's sexual behavior and sexual knowledge. Trites has critiqued the cultural unease regarding adolescents' sexual lives and self-expression, noting that 'we live in a society that objectifies teen sexuality, at once glorifying and idealizing it while also stigmatizing and repressing it' (Trites 2000: 95). Levithan's discretion about anything constituting what Trites terms 'genital sexual contact', especially when enacted by the gender-fluid A, conveniently precludes the possibility of the novel being judged inappropriately graphic. Trites suggests that 'any gay YA novel as sexually explicit as, say, Blume's *Forever* would likely be labeled pornography' (Trites 1998: 50), and Levithan's approach seems more frustrating considering the explicit intertextual reference to Blume's novel which A makes and the significance the book played in A's emerging identity.

However, it is the third incident which threatens A and Rihannon's connection the most and which succeeds in thoroughly eclipsing any possibility of a romantic or erotic impulse. Although A and Rihannon are stymied by feelings of intimidation and unease in the first two scenarios, they manage to talk through and temporarily resolve their ambivalence. Yet both A and Rihannon find it impossible to overcome mutual feelings of disgust while A inhabits the body of the obese teenager, Finn Taylor. While A implores Rihannon not to 'look at the package. Look at what's inside' (Levithan 2012: 273), she is unable to raise any glimmer of romantic or even platonic feelings for A in this body, regardless of its sexual orientation. A is similarly alienated and repelled by A's affiliation with this body. When Rihannon admits that 'I can't see you inside. Usually I can. Some glimmer of you in the eyes. But not tonight', A 'in some way' feels 'flattered' and claims that it's 'okay. The reason you're not seeing it is because he's so unlike me. You're not feeling it because I'm not like this' (274). At no point is the obesity of the body that A is inhabiting specified as the reason for their aversion and neither Rihannon nor A is able to directly name the source of the abjection that they shrink from. Instead a conveniently opaque ellipsis is used which allows them to manage their repulsion:

> 'It's just an off night […]. We're allowed to have off nights, right? Especially considering….'
>
> 'Yeah. Especially considering.' (275)

Despite A's criticism of others for being harshly judgmental about this particular host body, A succumbs to the same systems of prejudice, stigma and shaming

around allegedly ordinary and abnormal bodies and feels 'guilty about how relieved I am to be a normal size the next morning' (276). This judgmental approach and conservative repulsion from any bodily state that might be considered dangerously deviant or abject continues through the novel. According to Julia Kristeva, an abject force is that 'which disturbs identity, system, order' (Kristeva 1982: 4), and thus a threat to norms of decency and integrity through decay, infection and disease. A confidently tells Rihannon about the enlightenment that A gained from living one day in the life of a blind young girl: A 'learned more from being her for a day than I'd learn from most people over a year. It showed me how arbitrary and individual it is, the way we experience the world' (Levithan 2012: 231). Yet A does not manage, or even particularly try, to sustain this admirable philosophy about the richness of each person's individuality and diversity.

In contrast, A is alienated and repulsed by several bodies that A occupies during the novel, which are presented to the reader as dangerous because of their impure, abject and self-destructive states which inconveniently defy conventions of childhood purity and care-free innocence. The body of a teenage addict is described as a neuter and is never afforded any contextual or personal characteristics such as a name, a gender, a sexual orientation or an ethnicity. The pestilential force of this abject adolescent challenges even A's flexibility regarding reliable norms of bodily behaviour: 'the body makes me feel like it wants to defecate and vomit. First in the usual way. Then I feel I want to defecate through my mouth and vomit through the other end. Everything is being mangled' (63). Later in the novel, A inhabits the body of Kelsea, a girl preoccupied with plans for suicide. Despite feeling sympathy for Kelsea's isolation and distress, A sanctimoniously regards Kelsea as a toxic menace that must be policed in order to avoid contamination to other children and to the very concept of childhood psychic and physical innocence: 'I get off the seesaw, back away from the park. Because now I feel like I am the thing the parents are afraid of. I am the reality they want to avoid. No, not just avoid – *prevent*. They don't want me anywhere near their children, and I don't blame them. It feels as if everything I touch will turn to harm' (127).

While Levithan's work is committed to the investigation and reimagining of conservative norms, biases and hierarchies around sexualities and gender expressions, he disappointingly does not extend this advocacy for respect and acceptance of diversity to all experiences of bodily and gender expression. Although both Rihannon and A express strong dislike for what they consider to be the contrived and sentimental children's picture-book, *The Giving Tree* (1964), *Every Day* shares much ideologically with that story's message – 'Love means never having to lose your limbs' (Levithan 2012: 222) – and its attendant assumptions about the importance of the right kind of love and the correct kind of flawless embodiment. Regardless of the myriad of diverse perspectives in which A has resided, A ultimately perpetuates hegemonic assumptions regarding the importance of being able-bodied, healthy and suitably normal. The novel maintains and circulates conservative systems governing biases and

judgments of what constitutes desirable and unacceptable embodiment and what kind of person constitutes the right romantic partner. Rihannon eventually admits that she cannot continue her involvement with A since A 'is a different person every day' and that, despite her best efforts, she 'can't love every single person you are equally' (278). Even by the end of the novel, Rihannon still insists on maintaining hegemonic gender codes, conceptualizing A as both male and heterosexual and thus assuming that A's future romantic partners would automatically be female and straight: 'I want you to know, if you were a guy I met – if you were the same guy every day, if the inside was the outside – there's a good chance I could love you forever. […] There might be girls out there who could deal with it. I hope there are. But I'm not one of them. I just can't do it' (279). Likewise A presumptuously and conservatively decides that the best replacement romantic partner for Rihannon is a heterosexual male, Alexander, whom A presents to Rihannon as a *fait accompli* at the end of the novel, concluding that 'You'll find the things in him that you find in me […] Without the complications' (280).

Levithan's device of using the continuous present tense throughout the novel implies a promising sense of constant mobility and ongoing journey which mirrors A's relentless flow from one body to another. This narrative strategy reinforces the apparently unclassifiable status of A's fluid subjectivity and resistance to stereotypical compartmentalization. Yet A's difference is never comprehended or represented beyond the existing, normalizing frameworks of gender binaries and physical embodiment. I agree with Michelle Abate and Kenneth Kidd's proposal that 'understanding children's literature as queer means embracing trajectories and tonalities other than the lesbian/gay-affirmative and celebratory' (Abate and Kidd 2011: 9). Unfortunately, *Every Day* does not fulfil its potential to do so. In the end the novel succumbs to the pattern dominating contemporary YA fiction that Rebekah Wheadon has observed:

> If queer characters can never be written without pointing to their otherness, the very notion of inclusivity is troubled. […] As LGBTQ persons are become more socially accepted, they must also resist being normalized, as that normalization is a part of the same process that first othered queerness. The same can be said for YA: the attempt to resist a normalizing of queerness through heterosexuality is necessary. The tension, then, is two-fold: queerness must resist heteronormativity, a resistance that struggles against being tamed (normalized within heteronormativity) and being othered. (Wheadon 2012: 18–9)

The openness, progress and expansion within the novel's provocative premise are not actualized as Levithan ultimately maintains normative systems for defining and regulating identity in traditional and reactionary regimes of heteronormativity and body aesthetics. Even the covers of the UK and US editions of the novel indicate this presumption of heterosexual norms, heteronormative romance and normal adolescent bodies: the same two figures, one male and one female, both

presumably heterosexual appear on one cover while the posture, silhouettes and black and white colours of the two figures on the second cover suggest the conventional binary of a heterosexual couple. Despite the tantalizing possibilities raised by A's protean engagement with identity, gender expressions and embodiment, it seems that these complexities are still impossible to accommodate within the literary imagination of contemporary YA fiction.

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